

AN AMERICAN 'PARTHENON'

Walter Gropius's Athens US Embassy Building between Regionalism, International Style and National Identities

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Abstract

In 1954 the United States, embarked on an embassy-building program that sought to represent its expansive foreign policy by means of a bold embrace of modernist architecture. For this purpose, the Foreign Buildings Office issued a set of new guidelines asking architects to present designs for buildings that would be modern, open to the local traditions of the host country and American at the same time. Walter Gropius's The Architects Collaborative was among the architectural firms that managed to obtain such a commission for the US embassy in Athens, Greece. The designs were officially presented in 1957 (the building was inaugurated in 1961) and were supposed to achieve a balance between a regionalist sensitivity, a dedication to the principles of Modern architecture and the United States' national claims. Gropius predictably underlined Parthenon as the source of his inspiration and resorted to an extensive use of 'classical' Greek marble which was combined with standard modernist techniques and materials. But how could an International Style stand at the same time as national and open to regionalist loans from the Greek classical and vernacular tradition? This paper examines the Athens embassy building as a watered-down intersection between regionalism and modern architecture, a kind of populist modernism which prefigured or were typical of a crisis of both regionalism and modernism. The regionalist/classical connotations of the building are framed in a postcolonial context which casts a new light on this controversial attempt towards a new type of International Style.

Keywords: Gropius; International Style; Modernism; Regionalism; Colonialism

'On a sloping site about a mile from the Parthenon stands the new U. S. Embassy. It is a symbol of one relatively young democracy at the fountainhead of many old democratic and architectural traditions': With these words began a 1961 article in the *Architectural Forum* presenting to the American public the recently inaugurated US embassy in Athens by Walter Gropius's The Architects Collaborative (TAC) (*Architectural Forum*, 1961, 120). In the peak of the Cold War, the reference to the Parthenon served to convey the idea that the

United States represented a modern form of democracy, the rightful successor of the ancient Greek democratic spirit which was of course juxtaposed to the Soviet totalitarian system. The building was part of a broader embassy-building program of the United States government that sought to represent its expansive foreign policy by means of an ambitious embrace of modernist architecture. The program began in the 1930s, but it was radically reorganized in 1954, when, for the first time, the State Department appointed an architectural advisory committee to review all designs for the Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO). The representational pressure was great as the FBO and its new committee sought the ideal form of an architecture that would exhibit abroad an idealized self-image of the American national identity. To this end, it issued a set of new guidelines asking architects to submit designs that would *'represent American architecture abroad and adapt themselves to local conditions and cultures so deftly that they are welcomed, not criticized, by their hosts.'* (Architectural Record, 1956, 161).

Walter Gropius's The Architects Collaborative was among the architectural firms that managed to obtain such a commission for the US embassy in Athens, Greece. It was a direct assignment, without a design competition having been announced for it. The designs were officially presented in 1957 (the building was inaugurated in 1961) and were supposed to propose a version of an Americanised Modernism that would balance the principles of the so-called International Style with a regionalist sensitivity. Framing the regionalist/classical connotations of the building in a postcolonial context, this paper seeks to reassess this controversial attempt towards a new type of International Style fit for the developing world.

The site selected for the US embassy was in a relatively undeveloped at the time area, close but beyond the limits of the city centre; the area was previously occupied by military barracks and it was also situated at a close distance from housing estates and informal settlements. The side streets of the embassy site were not paved and unlit with the local city council only dealing with these problems shortly before the inauguration of the building after pressures from

Gropius and the embassy staff, who wanted to further underscore its modern character.

The embassy's design is a three-storey square building with an atrium occupying the central space. Apart from its glass façade, protected in the ground floor level by a perforated blue ceramic curtain, what immediately draws attention is the exterior concrete colonnade (clad with Greek marble) which support horizontal beams from the two upper floors of the building. These crossbeams are suspended by steel hangers. The extended roof is insulated so as to protect the interior from the sun rays. (Figure 1).

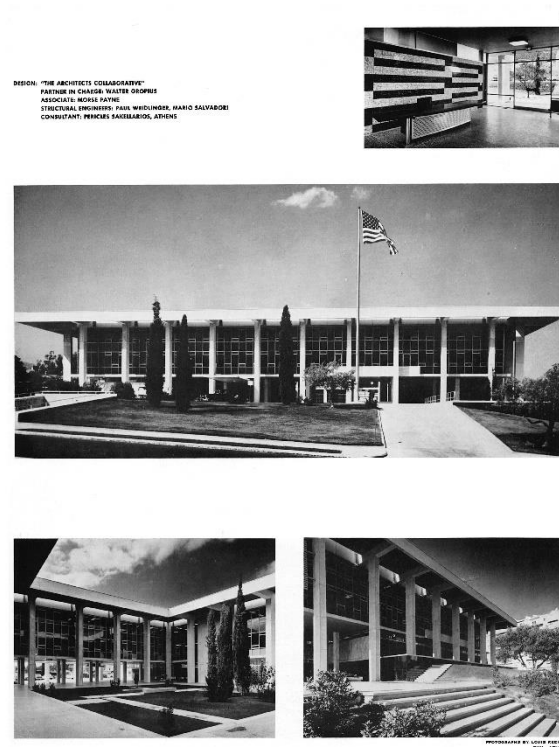


Figure 1. Louis Reens and Emil, US Embassy in Athens, 1957-1961. Source: *Art and Architecture*, 79(5), 1962.

For the proposed design, Gropius worked primarily with H. Morse Payne, Jr. of The Architects Collaborative and the Greek architect Pericles Sakellarios (a promoter of a regionalist modernism in Greece). A previous design by Ralph

Rapson and John van der Meulen had been abandoned due to changes in the FBO administration and the commission was given to Gropius's team. This caused a controversy as Rapson later complained that Gropius, who had asked to consult his design, had copied his idea. In any case, Rapson's design is closer to the International Style – that the FBO now wanted to avoid – as it lacks Gropius's classicist references. (Figures 2-3).

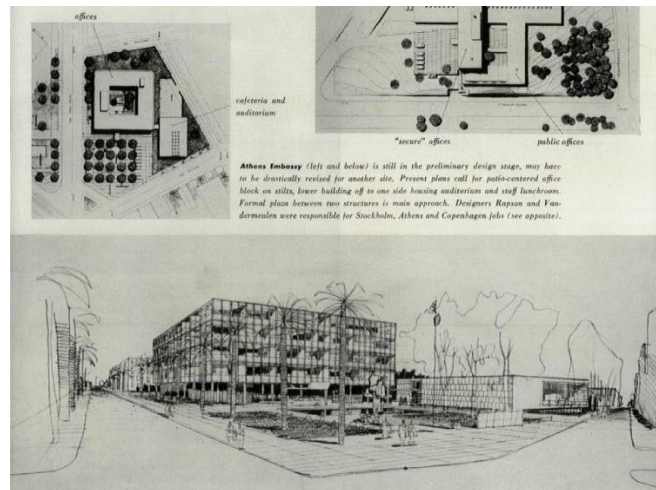


Figure 2. Ralph Rapson and John van der Meulen design and sketch for the US Athens Embassy building (never materialized). Source: *Architectural Forum*, 98(3), 1953.

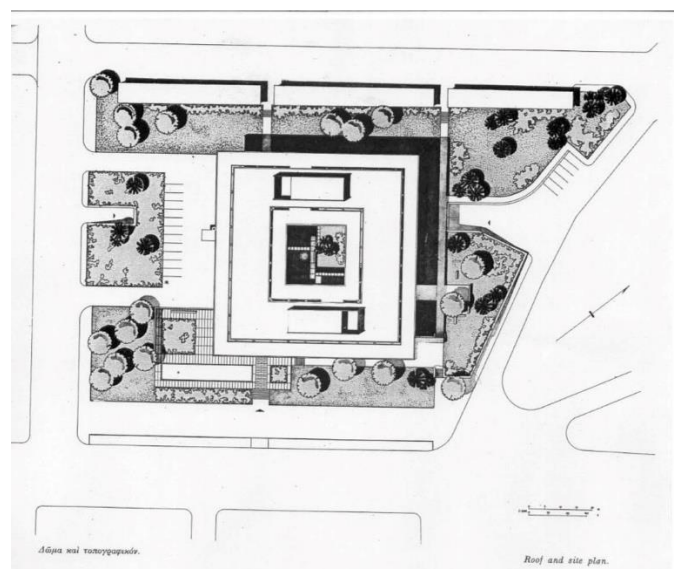


Figure 3. Walter Gropius, Design for the US Athens Embassy. Source: *Architektoniki* 1(6), 1957.

Pericles Sakellarios's contribution to the design is neglected. It is certain that the Greek architect did not simply function as the project's architectural supervisor in Athens. William Hughes, FBO's director, described the Greek architect as the proper person for the supervision 'because of his prominence in local affairs and because of his association with [Gropius] in the planning phases of the project,' whilst Gropius, offering the position to Sakellarios, referred to the Greek architect's 'invaluable help and support [...] in starting this job.'¹ It seems that Gropius had hired Sakellarios after a negative feedback from FBO's Architectural Advisory Committee to his initial design which had found his plan '*complicated and confused*,' and the whole building '*colossal, raw-boned, and forbidding*,' concluding that '*it reminded no one of the plan of the Parthenon or any other Greek landmark*.' (Loeffler, 1998, 150). Indeed, in the early design, the characteristic overhangs of later plans are absent with the whole construction appearing rather static and monumental. TAC's and Sakellarios's response to FBO's criticism was the moderation of the building's modernist elements through the underscoring of an abstract, sophisticated classicism which points more clearly to the ancient Greek past. According to Gropius, TAC's intention '*was to find the spirit of the Greek approach without imitating any classical means*.' However, the somewhat too obvious references to standard classical means – the colonnade, the arrangement of space imitating that of an ancient Greek temple and the extensive use of the material par excellence of classical art, Greek marble, mark a distinct and purposed deviation from the tenets of the so-called International Style.

It was no surprise that the FBO directly commissioned Gropius for this high-profile project, since Gropius's recent regionalist and environmentalist claims were in keeping with the reformed FBO embassy-building program along the line of a hybrid modernist/regionalist style. (Berdini, 1984, 182). And of course, we should bear in mind that, in parallel with the Athens Embassy building, Gropius and his team worked for the designs of the University of Baghdad project. Pivotal in the adaptation of the State Department's ambitions to this hybrid style was

¹ See letter of William P. Hughes to Gropius, 3.3.1959, and letter of Gropius to Pericles Sakellarios, 9.3.1959.

the contribution of architect Pietro Belluschi, an advocate of regionalism in the US. In 1954 Belluschi, Dean of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning, had been appointed head of the FBO's advisory architectural committee which assessed Gropius's design (at the same time the two architects were collaborating in the designs of the ill-fated gigantic real estate development project Back Bay Center in Boston). The next year Belluschi published an article in the *Architectural Record* stressing the importance of local architectural traditions as a source of inspiration for the new FBO program. His article resulted after an FBO-funded travel to developing countries with the purpose of studying local architectural traditions for future embassy buildings. Belluschi's critique was not original; it followed a long tradition of a critical stance towards modernity on the basis of the dichotomy of culture versus civilization, organic unity versus chaos. Citing the explosion of modern media and transportation as the cause of 'losing touch' with the local environment and the gradual deprivation of direct, non-mediated emotions, Belluschi commented: *'Our elegant magazines will sell pretty pictures to entice people in Main or Florida or Oregon or Pakistan. Under those conditions it is difficult to achieve convincing and heartfelt unity.'* (Belluschi, 1955, 138). An attentive reader, however, cannot miss the irony; for by naively illustrating his article with photos from societies where this organic unity supposedly remained undisrupted, Belluschi in reality sold to the American public exotic and primitivist pictures of a present that was rapidly becoming a past due, in large part, to the American foreign intervention that was radically transforming those very same societies. In other words, as Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi remark, *'modern architecture, when it took up some notion of local heritage, could represent itself as the healing praxis for that which it had injured.'* (Isenstadt & Rizvi, 2008, 20). Or, in Ron Robin's analysis, Belluschi praised local construction practice merely as 'customs' which as such were perceived *'unchanging, stagnant, and, by implication, inferior'* as opposed to the freely developed, supposedly undogmatic (equally open to the past and the future) American modernism (Robin, 1992, 150). In the final analysis, this logic relegated *'native elements to the level of decorations for buildings based on uniquely American "new techniques or new materials".'* (Robin, 150).

It is clear, then, that the FBO was primarily concerned about the symbolic aspect of this newfound regionalist sensitivity; its overall program represented an architectural iconography of gesture or an architecture of proclamation. This is evident in two of its fundamental instructions: that the buildings should express 'American democracy' but also consider the historical past and significance of each area. What was demanded, in other words, was a propagandist (hence superficial) version of modern regionalism that would adhere to the orthodox historical narratives of the US and each one of the host countries.

It is from this standpoint that we should make sense of Gropius's great care in adapting his post-war principles of total architecture to the demands and diplomatic ambitions of the American government for this specific project; thus, presenting his designs for the Athens embassy he stressed that:

architecture begins beyond the fulfilment of practical problems [...] and must manifest a psychological quality or attitude symbolizing its purpose. [...] Our aim was [...] a building which should appear serene, peaceful and inviting, mirroring the [...] political attitude of the United States. Also, the design should abide by the classical 'spiritus loci' [...] but in contemporary [...] terms. (Gropius, 1957, p. 161)

The correspondence between Gropius and Sakellarios shows that this classical tradition was not understood by the embassy staff or, even if it had, its translation into the design was not always welcome. The Ambassador, for instance, constantly pressed upon U. S. bureaucrats to impose changes in the design such as getting rid of the patio – a 'wasted space' as he called it – in order to make more space for offices.²

But this correspondence also points to another interesting fact: that in their attempt to conform to an abstract idea of classicism, function followed form; in this reversal of Gropius's Bauhaus principles, the material – in our case the Greek marble – could not easily adapt to the awkward version of the embassy's regionalist modernism: part of the black marble used for the interior soon faded

² See letter of Sakellarios to Gropius of 4.4.1961. The issue of "wasted space" is also discussed in the letters of Sakellarios to Gropius of 14.10.1960, 17.12.1960, 8.2.1961 as well as in Gropius's reply of 14.12.1961.

from the effect of the sun with its more exposed pieces cracking at their weakest points due to the extreme heat.³

Time and again the American press highlighted the Athens embassy as a successful combination of a 'neoclassic expressive freedom' which in essence constituted a new rendition of the International Style – a moderate, watered down modernism to be exported to the developing countries that the US wished to pull within its sphere of influence. Pivotal to this 'moderate modernism' was the adoption of formal elements alluding to the regional architecture or, more broadly, to a historicist style which had been instrumental in imagining the nation where it did not exist.

The intention of the American government and the architects of the Embassy to 'offer' to the city of Athens a building that would be exemplarily modern, whilst, at the same time, would allude and even underline Greece's classical heritage, can be fully understood if seen through the colonialist rhetoric of Philhellenism. As Stathis Gourgouris has brilliantly observed, this '*Philhellenism in name was in reality anti-Hellenism*', for it adored an '*imaginary*,' '*non-existent*' Greece, hence constructing an ideal image of Greek culture against which modern Greek social life was routinely measured. (Gourgouris, 2012, 182-183). As a result, this 'production of Greece as a colonized ideal' presented contemporary Greeks as the exotic, oriental other who was eternally bound to the land of classic art and democracy but who also was – as an oriental subject – an alien to her or his own land. It was the civilized West, then, this narrative went on, that saved and revamped the classical heritage at an age when the Greeks had lost contact with it. And as this heritage was the foundation of Renaissance and Modernity – from which the West saw Greece being shut off for centuries – both the modern and the classical could only be imported to contemporary Greece.

And in fact, neoclassicism itself had been imported to Greece, right after the foundation of the modern Greek state in 1830, as a symbol of westernization and modernization of the new country. As Neni Panourgiá observes: '*Neoclassicism becomes the language of modern architecture, and architecture*

³ Letter of Sakellarios to Gropius, 10.8.1961.

becomes the language of the modern state. [...] Greece wants to be a modern nation in the language of neoclassicism'. (Panourgíá, 2004, 174). Now Modern Architecture – especially Le Corbusier's School and the German Neues Bauen – was imported to Greece in the 1920s during an intense period of national-liberal reforms. The principal target of those reforms was the westernization of the 'oriental' territories which had been recently acquired by the Greek state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, architecture, the so-called International Style this time, came to symbolize the modernization of the reorganized national space.

But if Athenians were more or less familiarized with the Modern Movement, the question to be asked is: how was Gropius's peculiar classicist modernism received in Greece? Was it found too modern? Did the public grasp the intended allusion to the Parthenon and the city's classical heritage? Reginald R. Isaacs comments that Gropius had found 'very attractive' the steel and concrete building, that is before its ornamentation with Greek marble, and that *'he knew very well that the Greeks would consider it an insult to leave exposed in plain view the concrete surfaces.'* (Isaacs, 1984, 1034). Isaac's view is misleading, not only because Gropius liked the finished Greek marble columns (as his letters to Sakellarios attest), but primarily due to its neglect of nearly four decades of Modern Movement Architecture in the Greek capital which makes implausible that the citizens of Athens would be scandalized by the embassy's restrained modernism. Jane Loeffler's comment on the US embassy in Rio de Janeiro can be verbatim adopted as regards the one in Athens, since the latter could also hardly be described *'as a uniquely American expression, when the modern movement had already arrived in [Athens] and did not need an introduction there courtesy of the United States.'* (Loeffler, 1990, 256). In this respect, let us consider CIAM's 4th conference on the functional city which ended up in Athens as well as Martin Wagner's 1935 lecture in Athens on urban planning. Of course, 1950s Athens was no Rio de Janeiro, but it is certain that the presence of modern architecture in the Greek capital was undermined in the American press. In the Greek press, on the other hand, the new American embassy did not cause any long-lasting sensation. We can say that it was welcomed in a climate

of political-diplomatic rapprochement between the two countries and a surging Americanization of popular culture. Indicatively, the popular weekly newspaper *Empros* celebrated the arrival in Athens of six American celebrities, scientist Robert Oppenheimer, author Irving Stone, Hollywood actor Robert Mitchum, director Robert Aldrich, actress Katherine Hepburn and architect Richard Stadelman. Stadelman, who was (and still is) the least known of all six had been assigned the supervision of the construction of Gropius's embassy in Athens. Stadelman was presented as a man familiarized with Greek customs and the local culture, who, nevertheless, didn't shy away from describing modern Greek architecture as 'rather backward' and of the Greek architects as 'lacking artistic spirit'. His suggestion was to bring closer Greek and American architects through cultural exchanges so as the former would catch up with the latter. Stadelman's views were described by the newspaper as 'objective'. (*Empros*, 1958, 14)

Thus, the acceptance of the American economic, technological and cultural superiority set the tone in the reception of the US embassy in Greece. Gropius's building was enthusiastically welcomed but rather than a constructive discussion of it, the Greek press offered edited versions of the official press release which Gropius's office issued on the occasion of the 1957 presentation of his designs in Athens. The most important steps on the promotion of the new project were the publication of its designs in the only Greek architectural journal of the period, *Architektoniki* (Architecture) in 1957 and an article by a major contemporary art critic, Angelos Prokopiou, in which the new embassy was overstatedly presented as '*the peak of the architectural transformation of Athens [...] a paradigmatic work of twentieth-century architecture not only for Greece, but internationally.*' (Prokopiou, 1957, 25) Prokopiou had also interviewed Gropius on the occasion, but his interview, apart from Gropius's admiration of the vernacular architecture of the Aegean islands, contained little more than a reproduction of Gropius's press release. (Prokopiou, 1957b, 3) The same optimistic tone was echoed in a monthly English-language publication, *Pictures from Greece*, a month after the official opening of the embassy, in which the model character of Gropius's work was projected. '*The new building,*' wrote its author, '*aims at the creation of a new style appropriate for development in the country where, in the past, architecture*

reached its greatest heights as a pure art. And it will undoubtedly be beneficial to the restoration of Athens if the example presented to her is widely followed. ([Prokopiou], 1961, 8-9) The article concluded by stressing that the Embassy was built by Greek craftsmen and with the use of predominantly Greek building materials (marble, cement, plaster and tiles). In reality, however, this contribution of Greek building materials and workforce was part of the State Department's embassy-funding program; seeking to minimize congressional criticism over budget excesses, the FBO had established a policy that offered to the host countries debt deductions over wartime currency credits in exchange of local building materials and labour.

Another interesting review can be found in the conservative 1961 Greek-language volume *Modern Building* which was dedicated to the promotion of a moderate, classicising version of modern architecture. An anonymous article dedicated to the recently completed embassy building framed it within the wider context of the FBO project. With the exception of Richard Neutra (who had designed the Karachi embassy), the author commented, all FBO architects used different means of a common classicist form which conceived each architectural element not only in connection to its environment but also in purely aesthetic terms. Gropius's embassy is praised as the most successful of the FBO program precisely because from the point of view of the arrangement of spaces and their construction it was in tune with the most contemporary technologies, but from the point of view of formal expression it was '*completely alien to the character of modern architecture.*' (Modern Building, 1961, 354)

To wrap things up, Gropius's embassy building exemplifies a watered-down intersection between regionalism and modern architecture, a kind of populist modernism proposed by a colonial power to an 'underdeveloped' country and which is typical of the crisis of both regionalism and modernism in the 1960s. The representational pressures of national identities – both of the rising global power of the U.S. as well as of the post-World War II developing countries, such as Greece – favoured this hybrid regionalist/modernist style which most often was translated into an ornamented modernism. To which extend this architectural gesture satisfied the ideological ambitions of both sides is a

question open to further research. As regards the American Embassy in Athens, however, the building would soon (only seven years after its inauguration) stand as a symbol of internal intervention due to the role and support of the U.S. government to the military coup of 1967. The American embassy would be the finishing point of the annual demonstrations celebrating the 1973 riot at the capital's Technical School and the ensuing events that led to collapse of the dictatorship in 1974. America's diplomatic claims in Greece as well as the building's allusion to democracy were irreparably damaged.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Prof. Emeritus Eleni Fessa-Emmanouil for letting me consult the part of Pericles Sakellarios's archive that she has conserved.

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